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THE FUR TRADE AND THE FUR SUPPLY

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Prior to the world war the international fur trade was handled in Great Britain and Germany. A considerable part of the American furs was shipped abroad and American buyers went to London and Leipzig to procure these furs among others gathered from all parts of the world. At the outbreak of the war importations of furs were reduced to a minimum, and American firms as well as foreign branch houses started dealing in the American product. The effect of the war on the fur trade was, therefore, revolutionary and commercially worked to the advantage of the United States.

Prior to the war, also, auction sales of furs had been held in London, but owing to difficulty in transportation as a result of the war, these sales began to be held in this country. Conditions have actually been reversed, and now not only does the American trade purchase American furs in American markets, but foreign dealers ship considerable portions of their annual collections to the American auction sales, and foreign buyers travel to the United States to purchase their supplies.

The fur auction sales held in St. Louis and New York City are of great importance to the American fur trade. The first St. Louis sale, held in 1915, amounted to considerable less than \$1,000,000, whereas the 1919 winter sale returned \$7,924,330, and the sale held in the winter season of 1921 netted on a declining market \$11,000,000. The first New York sale, in 1916, returned about a quarter of a million dollars, while the winter sale of 1919 totaled \$6,000,000; the winter sale of 1921 on a low market netted \$2,000,000. These figures give an idea of the tremendous offerings at these sales.

FUR TRADE STATISTICS

While statistics are wearisome and are generally taken with mental reservation, yet they serve in helping one form an opinion of the proposition in question. Statistics compiled by the United States Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce show that imports of furs and undressed fur skins during the calendar year 1920 were valued at \$84,427,592 as compared with \$69,289,909 in 1919 and \$32,158,939 in 1918. The value of imports for the calendar year 1920 shows an increase of approximately 22 per cent. Imports of dressed furs and manufactures of all kinds for the calendar year 1920 aggregated \$9,131,348 as compared with \$7,472,336 in 1919 and \$2,491,278 in 1918. The increase for the calendar year 1920 amounted to approximately 22 per cent, or about the same as for the imports of raw furs.

Exports and manufactures of domestic furs for the calendar year 1920 were valued at \$32,886,995 as compared with \$23,788,599 in 1919 and \$11,374,174 in 1918.

The Fur Dressers' and Fur Dyers' Association dressed, during the year 1918, \$35,212,230.28 worth of skins; in 1919, \$51,366,253.14 worth; and in 1920, \$52,910,589.43 worth.

The Board of Trade of the Fur Industry of the United States estimates the annual turn-over in the fur business for the year 1918 at \$232,748,201.86; for 1919, \$342,441,687.60; and for 1920, \$352,605-927.18. It is interesting to note here that the revenue accruing to the Federal Government from articles made of fur during 1920, on which there is a 10 per cent revenue tax, amounted to \$15,311,214.24.

The statistics which have just been enumerated furnish a fair estimate of the volume of the fur industry in the United States. It will be understood, however, that these figures are not immune to criticism; yet they are as correct a representation of the financial phase of the fur industry as it is possible to obtain under existing conditions.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FUR TRADE

The modern fur trade has developed in the past twenty-five years from a neglected, unimportant industry into one of the largest and most important in existence. The United States has grown to be the largest fur market and fur-consuming country in the world. The fur industry employs many thousands of men and women who make their living from furs and in turn contribute to the comfort of a great number of people.

An industry the finished product of which is so much in demand scarcely needs any further argument for permanent existence. Large industries always have important problems to meet and solve and the fur business is by no means an exception. During the past year the fur trade has been confronted with a number of very important issues. It has been demonstrated that the American fur supply can not be controlled by any single interest, that wild speculation meets with disaster, and that unhealthy competition has no place in the fur business. An all-important question still remaining unanswered concerns the future of the fur supply.

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED

If the fur industry is to progress along safe and sane lines, the source of supply should be more definitely assured. This is indeed a very difficult problem, but not impossible of solution; while it is mainly an economic problem, it can not be solved by the trade alone. Neither will the utterances of radical conservationists of wild life assist very greatly in solving the problem. Conservationists of this class generally have a few pet fur bearers in mind and are prejudiced regarding the others. They are satisfied with saying that the future of the fur trade rests entirely with those engaged in the industry. It is foolish to believe that a business of such proportions as the fur industry is not interested in conserving the source of the raw product. A number of raw-fur concerns have been for some time talking conservation and correct legislation for the protection of the fur bearers. Practically all believe that an educational campaign is the only means of bringing results. Some raw-fur dealers have argued the question before their state legislatures only to have their propositions defeated. Others have sent literature to farmers and trappers in various sections of the United States, with a view of educating them to protect and conserve the fur-bearing animals.

The Federal Government, state legislatures, agricultural colleges, and societies interested in the preservation of fur bearers should all lend assistance along practical lines in bringing together the interested parties to solve the problems regarding the source of supply. Intelligent work and cooperation of everyone concerned is necessary to retain permanently all species of fur bearers and not to jeopardize the fur industry.

LEGISLATION

Adequate laws for the protection of fur-bearing animals are indeed very necessary and helpful; but the majority of those now on the statute books do not prevent the decrease of animals in certain sections of our country, neither do they prevent the taking of young animals and unprime pelts, which are practically valueless to the fur trade. Approximately 45 to 55 per cent of the pelts coming to the markets fall into the unprofitable class. Fur of superior quality and more of it would come to the raw fur markets if open seasons were made uniform for states where similar climatic conditions prevail.

Every state should require trappers to take out a trapping license, and in addition every trapper should be bound to turn in to the game warden under oath a report of his catch for the season. The renewal of a permit should be withheld until such report is made. With legitimate trapping under wise laws, the fur supply of our country will not be materially affected.

Areas in which fur bearers have become depleted should be closed completely for a period of years and, so far as may be consistent with the interests of game birds and animals, these regions should be restocked. The national forests furnish excellent breeding grounds where fur bearers can reproduce unmolested, and stock from these breeding grounds could well supply depleted areas. In restocking there is always the possibility that the fur bearers will become pests to the neighboring landowners. This can be overcome, however, if the number of breeding animals is kept constant by proper trapping each season, or oftener if necessary.

There should be cooperation between the Federal and State Governments and the fur trade in framing suitable laws, which are very necessary to place the fur-bearing animals and the fur industry on a sound basis.

NEED FOR EDUCATION

Lack of information on the part of farmers, trappers, and legislators is mainly responsible for inadequate laws pertaining to fur bearers. Many persons do not know that fur-bearing animals are a great asset to a state, and have no idea concerning the annual income derived from pelts produced in their particular state.

Two years ago the raw-fur dealers of the State of New York employed counsel and went to considerable expense to defeat legislation authorizing the hunting of raccoons beginning October 1 instead of November

15. They were unsuccessful and now the hunting of raccoons is authorized in New York to begin on October 1. Raccoon skins taken during October are practically valueless, and a useless waste of fur is the result of trapping under this legislation.

In order to bring about suitable legislation it seems very necessary to launch an educational campaign through state institutions and state societies to cover the entire country. The Biological Survey of the United States Department of Agriculture is in a position to direct such a campaign for the reason that it is deeply interested in the practical conservation of fur bearers and in the future of the fur industry.

If laws such as are herein suggested were passed in the various states, the fur-bearing animals would be conserved on a sane basis. Proper legislation would do more than this—it would for the first time give us an approximate number of the various pelts trapped annually in the different states. The importance of such statistics can not be overestimated. We would then have a firmer foundation on which to base arguments for or against conservation of certain species. The tremendous offerings by the fur auction-sales companies in the United States can not be considered an index of the animals trapped yearly in this country. Muskrat skins to the number of 1,144,016 offered at a single auction make indeed a tremendous figure, but this does not tell the whole story. The chances are that this offering consisted of more than one season's catch. When pelts are received at the raw fur houses they enter into the trade, pass from hand to hand, and undergo a change so complete that their identity is practically lost. It is, therefore, impossible to distinguish with any degree of certainty between muskrats, minks, or foxes originating in the United States and those originating in Canada or any other country.

REARING FUR BEARERS IN CAPTIVITY

The breeding of fur-bearing animals in captivity and the stocking of the national forests and game preserves are enterprises that should be encouraged. The production of foxes, skunks, beavers, and muskrats has proved successful when intelligently managed. The reason this phase of the fur industry has not met with greater success is because there has been too much publicity concerning financial returns and too few warnings to ranchers of pitfalls and obstacles to be overcome.

Inferior animals, temperament, feeding and breeding problems, sanitation, diseases, and parasites all raise questions to be faced by the average stockman and farmer. Every person engaged in the rearing

of fur-bearing animals will meet these same problems sooner or later, and success in the business depends largely on just how completely they are solved. A rancher must further consider that he is handling wild animals in captivity and not domesticated stock in the ordinary sense of the term. It is very true that fur bearers born in captivity are more docile than those from the wild, but they are not in the strict sense of the word fully domesticated.

A knowledge of pelts, pelt values, and market requirements is an additional requisite a fur farmer should possess in order to operate his business intelligently. His harvest is pelts, and he should be well informed as to primeness and quality of fur as well as to market requirements.

A number of raw-fur buyers claim that fur produced on ranches is not popular with the fur trade because it is unprime and lacks the quality and finish of wild fur. This is absolutely untrue, for practically all the silver fox pelts on the market are taken from ranch-bred stock.

The Biological Survey is endeavoring to keep an up-to-date list of persons engaged in rearing fur-bearing animals, in order to be in close touch with the business. It may be interesting to learn that its records show at present 500 breeders engaged in rearing one or more species of fur-bearing animals. The list is as follows: Silver foxes, 265; red and cross foxes, 74; blue foxes, 1; skunks, 81; raccoons, 24; minks, 20; muskrats, 10; opossums, 9; martens, 7; squirrels, 3; beavers, 2; fishers, 2; Russian ermines, 1; and badgers, 1. Although this list for the United States is not complete, it gives a fair idea of what is being accomplished.

The rearing of fur-bearing animals in captivity is practically a new industry, and many people engaged in the business know little if anything about it. The information at hand on this subject is very meager indeed; hence most persons are very shy in answering questions relating to the production of fur-bearing animals. State agricultural colleges and experiment stations and state game commissions and conservation societies should promote the raising of fur-bearing animals in captivity. Extensive investigations along the line of feeding, breeding, and management should be made as well as with regard to diseases and parasites.

CONCLUSION

Too much stress can not be laid on the value of the fur industry in producing a most important article in our domestic as well as in our

foreign trade. Prior to the world war, the world's fur market was in Europe, but since then it has been transferred to the United States.

The largest fur sales in the history of the world are held in St. Louis and New York City. The winter sale held in St. Louis in 1920 totaled \$27,102,588. Ever since the world began, people have worn furs and they will probably continue to do so indefinitely. The fur business, therefore, has good reason for existence.

Information regarding seasons when pelts are prime is necessary for trappers and state legislators in order that the trapping seasons of practically all fur bearers may be properly limited. It is also essential to establish close seasons for certain fur bearers that need this protection. Enforcement of such laws will most certainly prove very effective in conserving the fur-bearing animals, thus establishing the future of the fur trade.

Fur farming is a commendable and hopeful adjunct to the fur industry. Foxes are being raised successfully and the industry has attracted much attention, principally on account of the high prices paid for breeding stock. Skunks, muskrats, and beavers have under certain conditions been raised successfully. Fur farming, therefore, occupies a place in the general scheme of conservation, but the extent to which this industry may become a factor in increasing the production of fur will be determined only by future developments.

Biological Survey, Washington, D. C.